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Hidden unrest in US backyard

Caribbean key to US security

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Washington

Gone are the days when defending the Caribbean, for United States military planners, meant sending a few marines or a Navy frigate to punish a peg-legged pirate or a "banana republic" that had transgressed against US citizens or property.

Since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and even before, the US has in effect been facing the token power of the Soviet Union from just 90 miles across the Florida Keys.

US strategists, in the words of one, now see "Cuban-supported subversion spreading like red ink on a blotter up Central America, from Costa Rica to Nicaragua to El Salvador" — approaching closer and closer to the vast oil and gas fields of Mexico, an ultimate Soviet-Cuban target, some believe.

The young and restless people of the newly liberated Caribbean republics see things very differently. They believe yesterday's slogans of the 1898 Spanish-American war and Yankee superiority are as outdated as a 17th century buccaneer's treasure map. They hanker after jobs, education, and a decent life.

They see Fidel Castro's revolutionary Cuba offering help when they need it. They forget that the Soviets pay Dr. Castro's heavy bills to keep him in power. They often ignore the millions of US dollars and thousands of man-hours expended in humanitarian relief by the US armed services, as in last year's floods in Jamaica, Honduras, Belize, Colombia, and Nicaragua.

So the United States finds itself on the defensive. When a leftist coup seized power in Grenada in March 1979, Washington did little but mutter its mild disapproval. Cuba, within days, rushed arms, teachers, and social workers to the victorious leftists. Now, Cuban engineers in Grenada are building a major airfield extension. Soon it will be able to accommodate the huge Soviet jet transports connecting Cuba with the Cuban military outposts in Africa.

The United States, meanwhile, sends all the Caribbean countries less economic or military aid in one year than it supplies to a single distant ally, such as Turkey. And while Washington worries about spreading Cuban influence, it also grows more concerned about the increasing Soviet presence in Cuba itself.

US intelligence experts see the famous Soviet "brigade" of 3,000 men or so in Cuba slowly but surely improving the quality, if not the numbers, of their armament. These experts are convinced that it was only US nuclear and naval superiority that caused Nikita Khrushchev to "blink" and pull his Soviet missiles out of Cuba in 1962. Today they see that US leverage largely eroded.

Cuba provides what Gen. David S. Jones (USAF), chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently called "a wide range of activities inimical to US interests." These include "ports and repair facilities for Soviet ship visits, airfields for Soviet reconnaissance flights, and a readily available surrogate force which can support anti-US movements in the area" — as it did for victorious guerrillas in Nicaragua last year, and is ready to do, say intelligence sources, in El Salvador and other insurgencies to come.

Added to this is the probable monitoring of US communications, of air and ship movements, and oil tanker lifelines northward from Venezuela to the United States, as well as the Caribbean island oil refineries and US strategic bauxite sources in Jamaica, Guyana, and Surinam (where Army sergeants staged their own successful coup last month).

In a European, Mideastern, or African war scenario, US troops and ships would have to move rapidly outward to the Atlantic from US Gulf of Mexico ports like Galveston, Texas. Such convoys would be within easy range of Cuba's swift Soviet-built missile boats and two operational Soviet submarines at the expanding naval base of Cienfuegos.

Soviet aircraft on the island, now including a squadron of 12 to 18 MIG-23s (some still in crates), at San Antonio air base in southwestern Cuba, and eight or nine squadrons of older jets, also could challenge other US strategic sea lanes. These stretch from US West Coast ports through the Panama Canal toward the Atlantic.

Neither the Soviets nor the Cubans, however, can forget Uncle Sam's foothold on Cuban soil, the giant, 45-square-mile land area around Guantánamo Bay, at Cuba's eastern tip.

Guantánamo, a thorn in Fidel Castro's side, and its big-sister US naval base at Roosevelt Roads (known to US Navy old-timers as "Rosie Roads"), Puerto Rico, provide year-round training and deployment facilities for the US Atlantic Fleet, home-ported at Norfolk, Virginia.

Just to the southeast of "Rosie Roads" lies the shell-scarred US island of Vieques. Over objections of local fishermen, eagerly echoed by Puerto Rico's terrorist and nonterrorist opposition movements (which have killed several US service personnel in ambushes since last year), the Navy tests its guns and missiles on Vieques.

To demonstrate that the US is not a "paper tiger" in the Caribbean, President Carter and Defense Secretary Harold Brown, during the clamor last October over the Soviet "combat brigade" in Cuba, created a new Caribbean contingency task force command under Rear Adm. Thomas Replogle at Key West, Florida.

What does Caribbean defense really mean for a United States already burdened with crises in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean?

"In peacetime," answers a senior US service officer, "a major annoyance — one which Washington has too often hoped would simply go away if we didn't talk about it."

"In wartime..." he says, pausing, "it means big, big trouble. It might mean bringing in sea and air task forces from other theaters. And I'm talking about people and hardware already stretched to the limit, around the world."

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